From the Modern Nation to Postnational Indifference

A Hypothesis on the Loss of Collective Mourning

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Abstract

The idea of a "postnational world" is usually understood as a prediction: nation-states will lose strength, national identities will dissolve, and politics will reorganize itself at supranational, global, local, or civilizational scales. However, a stronger thesis can be formulated: in many Western societies, a postnational condition already exists, not because states or national identities have disappeared, but because, among broad sectors of the population, the sense of loss at the possible disappearance or profound transformation of the nation has faded.

The modern nation was a relatively recent historical construction. Before it, there were clans, tribes, peoples, cities, kingdoms, empires, universal religions, linguistic communities, estates, and dynastic loyalties. Intense forms of belonging existed, but they were not necessarily "national" in the modern sense. Modernity produced a specific form of imagined community: a large, anonymous, territorialized population, homogenized by schooling, a standard language, administration, the army, the press, maps, censuses, and a shared historical memory. That nation was not false: it was constructed, but real in its effects.

The postnational condition appears when that construction is no longer experienced as destiny. The population continues to use the state, vote, pay taxes, speak a language, hold documents, and celebrate national holidays; but the nation ceases to be a sacred inheritance and becomes an administrative framework, an economic space, a civic convenience, or a weak cultural preference. At that point, the decisive question is no longer whether the nation exists, but how many people would truly suffer if it ceased to exist as historical continuity.

But this indifference does not necessarily imply stability. A society may appear postnational and functional while living off the inheritance of an earlier nation: social trust, institutions, habits of cooperation, shared memory, and a common culture still in operation. The question is whether such a society can withstand a severe crisis once those bonds weaken. The risk of postnationality is not only the disappearance of an identity, but the emergence of a more fragile society, more dependent on the state

and more exposed to conflicts between groups that no longer recognize themselves as part of the same collective destiny.

1. Before the Nation: Forms of Belonging Without Modern Nationalism

Historically, the nation is not the normal or universal form of political belonging. Humanity has lived far longer under structures of kinship, lineage, tribe, city, empire, religion, lordship, or dynasty than under modern nations. This does not mean that collective identity did not exist before. It did, and it was often extremely strong. But it did not necessarily take the modern form of a sovereign nation composed of equal citizens who recognize themselves as part of the same historical subject.

In clan or tribal societies, belonging was organized around real or mythical kinship, loyalty to the group, the territory used or defended, ancestors, rites, and reciprocal obligations. Territory could be extremely important, but it was not usually conceived as a "national homeland" in the modern sense; rather, it was land for hunting, grazing, worship, burial, lineage, or survival. The bond was concrete, personal, and sacred, not abstract and national.

In ancient cities, such as the Greek poleis or republican Rome, belonging was civic, religious, and military. To be Athenian, Spartan, or Roman meant participating in a political body, in cults, laws, duties, and privileges. But the ancient city was not a modern nation: it was a limited, hierarchical, exclusionary political community, with slaves, metics, allies, or subjects. Roman citizenship, especially with imperial expansion, became an extremely broad legal category, but precisely for that reason it was more imperial than national: it could incorporate different peoples without demanding full national homogeneity from them.

Empires operated differently. An empire does not need all its subjects to feel they are members of the same nation. It can govern through hierarchies, agreements, local autonomies, official religions, intermediary elites, taxation, and loyalty to the emperor or the center. The Roman, Persian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, or Spanish Empires integrated diverse populations under a common sovereignty without necessarily turning them into a single homogeneous nation. Empire tolerates, administers, or hierarchizes difference; the modern nation tends to homogenize it.

In medieval Europe, the main forms of belonging were local, religious, estate-based, legal, and dynastic. A person could feel attached to a town, a parish, a language, a kingdom, Christendom, a lord, a guild, or a lineage. There could be an awareness of being Catalan, Castilian, Frankish, English, or Lombard, but this did not yet amount to modern mass nationalism. The medieval peasant did not normally conceive of himself as part of a sovereign national subject; his political world was mediated by lordships, charters, jurisdictions, the Church, monarchy, and the local community.

The great universal religions also produced supranational forms of belonging. Latin Christendom, the Islamic umma, or the Chinese idea of imperial civilization were not

nations: they were broader orders that could include different peoples. Within these frameworks, supreme loyalty could be directed toward God, religious law, the emperor, the caliph, the king, the cosmic order, or civilization, not necessarily toward a sovereign popular nation.

Therefore, it is correct to say that modern nations have not always existed. What has always existed is the human need for belonging, boundary, memory, kinship, protection, and difference. The modern nation does not invent belonging; it invents a specific way of turning scattered forms of belonging into a mass political subject.

2. The Modern Nation: A Real Construction

The modern nation is born when several dimensions merge: territorial state, popular sovereignty, standardized language, common history, central administration, national army, public school, press, maps, censuses, anthems, monuments, martyrs, literature, and an integrated economy. The modern nation is not simply an ethnicity, nor a race, nor a language, nor a state. It is a historical synthesis.

That is why the modern nation can be described as “constructed” without this meaning that it is false. A cathedral is also constructed, and that does not make it unreal. The nation is a political and symbolic architecture. Its success consisted in making millions of strangers imagine themselves as part of the same community, with a shared past and a common destiny. A peasant, a soldier, a teacher, a civil servant, and a worker might never know one another, but they could learn to see one another as compatriots.

Modernity needed this type of community. Industrialization required mobility, literacy, common communication, administrative discipline, and a relatively standardized culture. The state needed citizens, soldiers, taxpayers, and workers. The nation provided the emotional narrative that made this integration bearable and honorable. Taxes were not paid only to the king: one contributed to the homeland. One did not die only for a monarch: one died for the nation. One did not learn a standard language merely for utility: one learned it as the national language.

This process was especially strong in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Liberal revolutions, Romanticism, public education, military service, newspapers, the novel, patriotic historiography, and centralized states produced a new kind of subject: the national citizen. The modern nation turned belonging into a horizontal emotion: all members of the nation, rich or poor, educated or illiterate, urban or rural, could imagine themselves as symbolic brothers.

But this national fraternity was always ambiguous. It could emancipate against empire or absolutism, but it could also impose uniformity, persecute minorities, crush languages, invent heroic pasts, or turn internal difference into a threat. The modern nation gives political dignity to the people, but it also requires that the people allow themselves to be defined, classified, and represented.

3. The Postnational Does Not Mean the Absence of the State

The usual mistake is to think that the postnational implies the immediate disappearance of states. It does not. Postnationality can coexist with strong states. In fact, many societies today still have passports, armies, police forces, tax authorities, borders, elections, national sports teams, and patriotic symbols. What changes is the intensity of belief.

The postnational condition appears when the state continues to exist, but the nation is no longer experienced as an organic continuity. For many individuals, the country is a place in which to reside, work, consume, receive benefits, access services, enjoy legal security, or develop a private life. But it is no longer necessarily an inheritance that must be transmitted.

The difference is subtle but decisive. The modern national citizen thought: “my nation must continue.” The postnational subject thinks: “as long as there is stability, rights, employment, and coexistence, the cultural composition of the country may change.” He does not always formulate it this way, but he acts as if he believes it. National continuity ceases to be a supreme value and becomes a secondary, negotiable, or even uncomfortable preference.

This explains a contemporary paradox: many people may say that they love their country and, at the same time, feel no profound loss if their country radically changes its language, demographic composition, public religion, historical memory, or everyday culture. Their patriotism is administrative, sporting, sentimental, or customary, but not civilizational. They like their country as landscape, welfare, gastronomy, healthcare system, holidays, football, or childhood; not necessarily as a historical subject that must endure.

But here a decisive problem appears: the fact that something “works” during a period of prosperity does not prove that it is stable in a situation of crisis. Many postnational societies continue to function because they live off an institutional, cultural, and moral inheritance accumulated by the modern nation: social trust, obedience to the law, habits of cooperation, self-control, a sense of duty, administrative continuity, low internal violence, and a certain common memory. But if these foundations are consumed without being renewed, society may preserve the appearance of normality for a time while losing the bonds that made it possible.

A postnational community may appear peaceful as long as there is economic growth, public services, security, consumption, and an absence of serious conflicts. However, when a severe crisis appears —economic, energy-related, military, migratory, fiscal, religious, or one of public order— it may become clear that beneath the administrative surface there was no sufficiently dense “we.” In that case, the old national consensus is not replaced by universal fraternity, but by a sum of groups, interests, resentments, and parallel communities. Society continues to function as

long as it is not subjected to stress; but under intense vulnerability it may fragment quickly.

That is why the formula “as long as it works” is ambiguous. It may be a sign of pragmatic maturity, but also a sign of historical unconsciousness. It works because inherited reserves of cohesion still remain. It works because the state maintains order. It works because latent conflict has not reached a critical point. But there is no guarantee that it will work indefinitely if common trust, shared culture, and the feeling of belonging disappear. The alternative to a living nation is not necessarily an open and harmonious society; it may be an administered, distrustful, tribalized society, or one held together only by an increasingly strong state apparatus.

4. Indifference as a Symptom

The most revealing question is not: “do nations still exist?” They obviously do. The question is: “how many people experience the profound transformation of their nation as a loss?” This is where the hypothesis of postnational indifference appears.

In many Western societies, a considerable part of the population seems to accept cultural, linguistic, or demographic changes according to a functional criterion: that whoever arrives should work, not disturb, obey the law, and not generate visible conflict. This formula reveals a profound mutation. The nation ceases to be a substantive historical community and becomes a system of minimal coexistence. The question is no longer “will we continue to be the same people?”, but “does it work?”.

This “as long as it works” is the psychological core of the postnational. It does not deny the existence of cultural differences, but it subordinates them to social peace, the labor market, and individual rights. Collective identity becomes manageable. If transformation does not immediately destroy security, consumption, employment, or private life, it is perceived as acceptable. Even when some experience it as loss, others experience it as normality, enrichment, inevitability, or simple irrelevance.

Postnational indifference, therefore, should not be confused with superior stability. A broad part of the population may not experience the transformation of the national historical subject as a loss, but this does not mean that the new society that results from it has greater cohesion. The opposite may occur: apparent tolerance may in reality be disaffection, fatigue, the privatization of life, or a simple inability to imagine long-term consequences.

In this sense, postnational society may live off moral rents. It inherits national institutions, interpersonal trust, infrastructure, habits of legality, educational systems, public security, and a common memory, but it ceases to transmit the deeper reasons why all this had to be preserved. The population uses the inheritance, but does not always recognize itself as heir to it. It enjoys order, but does not necessarily reproduce the cultural conditions that made that order possible.

There lies the risk: when common belonging weakens too much, conflicts cease to be internal conflicts within the same political community and may become clashes between groups that no longer recognize themselves as part of a shared destiny. Without a nation, without a common religion, without a sufficiently strong common culture, and without broad social trust, cohesion depends increasingly on the market, abstract law, and state coercion. That may suffice in calm times. But in hard times, perhaps not.

Here it is useful to distinguish between culture, nation, and phenotype. The fact that a society has historically had a certain ethnic, religious, linguistic, or phenotypical majority may form part of its historical self-perception. But the modern nation is not biologically reducible to that. Precisely for this reason, in advanced liberal societies, many people do not interpret demographic changes as national disappearance, but as a transformation of the resident population. The identity question is replaced by a normative question: are the laws respected? Is there equality? Is there coexistence? Is there prosperity?

For the classical nationalist, that answer is insufficient. A nation is not merely a contract of coexistence; it is a continuity of memory, language, customs, dead ancestors, landscapes, institutions, and symbolic descent. For the postnational subject, by contrast, that continuity may seem excessive, suspicious, or simply unimportant. The nation as inheritance weighs too heavily upon individuals who conceive of themselves above all as private projects.

5. Modernity Created the Nation; Hypermodernity Dissolves It

There is a historical irony here. Modernity created the nation in order to replace earlier forms of belonging: dynasty, religion, province, estate, empire, local community. But advanced modernity itself has produced forces that weaken the nation: economic globalization, universal human rights, mass migration, individualism, global cultural consumption, the internet, international English, supranational institutions, tourism, urbanization, secularization, and mobile labor markets.

The first modernity nationalized the masses. The second modernity privatizes and globalizes them. Where the nineteenth century said “people,” the twenty-first century says “individual,” “resident,” “taxpayer,” “user,” “consumer,” “worker,” “minority,” “citizen of the world,” or “person with rights.” National belonging does not disappear, but it competes with more flexible identities and more universal normative frameworks.

The contemporary subject may have multiple loyalties: city, region, state, Europe, company, digital network, ideological community, lifestyle, religion, language, political orientation, or moral cause. The nation ceases to monopolize meaning. And when it ceases to monopolize meaning, it also ceases to monopolize mourning. If a custom, a local language, a historical majority, or a way of life disappears, many do not experience it as an amputation, but as social change.

6. A Return to Historical Normality?

It may be said that the national age was a historical exception. For roughly two centuries, the nation managed to become the main vessel of political belonging. Before it, humanity had lived under more local, imperial, religious, or dynastic forms. After it, we may be returning to a world of fragmented belongings: global cities, continental blocs, economic empires, transnational religious communities, digital networks, private identities, and administrative states.

But this would not be a simple return to the past. The postnational condition does not reproduce the clan, the tribe, or the ancient empire. It is something new: highly juridified individuals, global consumers, bureaucratic states, universal rights, integrated markets, and planetary media cultures. The difference is that the subject no longer needs to imagine himself as part of a nation in order to live in an orderly way. He can live within a state without loving the nation; he can benefit from a cultural inheritance without wanting to transmit it; he can speak a language without feeling an obligation to preserve it; he can enjoy a civilization without feeling indebted to it.

This is perhaps the deepest rupture: the loss of historical gratitude. The modern nation asked for gratitude toward ancestors and responsibility toward descendants. Postnational subjectivity tends to live in the present: present rights, present welfare, present chosen identity. The past becomes critical or patrimonial material; the future, a matter of risk management. Between the two, national continuity weakens.

7. Objection: Nationalism Is Not Dead

However, it would be exaggerated to claim that nations have disappeared. In fact, we are witnessing national, populist, identitarian, sovereigntist, and civilizational reactions. Globalization has not eliminated nationalism; it has reactivated it in defensive forms. Wherever transformation is perceived as too rapid, unjust, or imposed, the desire for borders, sovereignty, and continuity reappears.

This forces us to qualify the thesis of indifference. It is possible that a social majority —perhaps 60%, 70%, or 80%, depending on the country and the moment— does not experience the loss of the national historical subject as an immediate tragedy. But there is also a significant minority that does experience it in this way. That minority may be 20%, 30%, or even larger in certain contexts. This is not necessarily a matter of superficial nostalgia, but of a real perception of loss: loss of continuity, language, memory, ways of life, social trust, sovereignty, or intergenerational transmission.

Contemporary politics moves precisely within this fracture: a de-dramatizing majority and a minority intensely aware of loss. The former tends to say: “nothing is wrong as long as there is coexistence and prosperity.” The latter replies: “when you finally want to react, the historical subject capable of doing so may no longer exist.” This tension explains a large part of the new political conflicts. The nation does not disappear

peacefully; it withdraws from the consciousness of many while becoming more intense among those who feel it is threatened.

The problem for movements of national reaction is that they often arrive late or under unfavorable conditions. When the consciousness of loss is activated, demographic, cultural, linguistic, or institutional transformation may already be very advanced. Moreover, those who react often face administrative, economic, media, and legal elites that interpret defensive nationalism as a moral anomaly or a political danger. Hence the reaction exists, but is not always sufficient to reverse the process.

For this reason, the present age is not simply postnational. It is an age of conflict between three logics: the national, the postnational, and the civilizational. The national logic seeks to preserve a concrete political people. The postnational logic seeks to administer rights, mobility, and diversity. The civilizational logic groups conflicts into broader blocs: the West, Islam, China, Europe, the Russian world, the Global South. The nation loses centrality, but it does not disappear; it is pressured from below by local and private identities, from above by global institutions, and from the sides by civilizations or transnational religions.

The correct hypothesis, therefore, is not that “there are no longer nations,” but that the nation has lost its self-evidence. It used to be the natural framework of modern politics. Now it is a disputed option. For some, it remains the condition of collective freedom. For others, it is a dangerous residue. For many, it is simply not a decisive question. And for a growing minority, precisely because many have ceased to see it as decisive, it becomes an urgent cause.

Conclusion

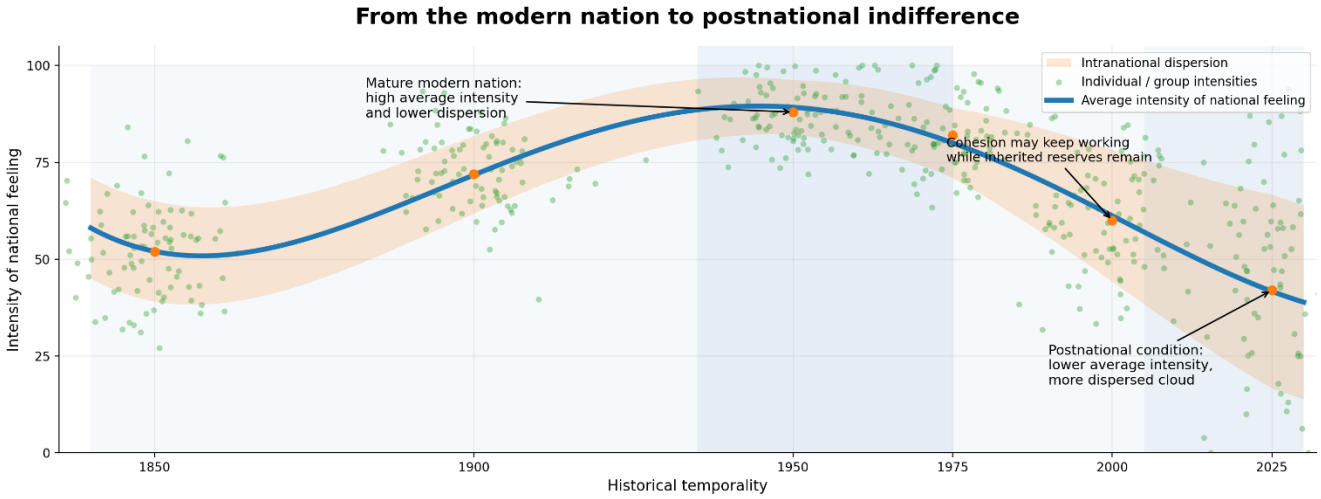
The deepest form of postnationality does not consist in the disappearance of flags, states, or passports. It consists in the disappearance of pain at the possible disappearance of national continuity. A nation may die long before its state disappears: it dies when it ceases to be transmitted as something valuable, when its members no longer feel that its loss would be a tragedy, when its culture becomes an aesthetic option, its language a tool, its history a museum, and its territory an economic platform.

Modernity created nations because it needed to turn scattered populations into integrated political subjects. Hypermodernity may undo them because it turns those political subjects into mobile individuals, consumers, residents, and rights-holders. In this sense, the postnational world is not only a possible future: among broad sectors, it is already a present sensibility.

But the society that succeeds the nation is not guaranteed superior cohesion. It may be more open, more flexible, and more plural; but it may also be more fragile, more dependent on state coercion, and less capable of withstanding deep crises. Wherever a strong “we” disappears, social peace may depend increasingly on economic

prosperity, technical administration, and public force. If those conditions fail, postnational indifference may discover too late that the nation was not only an emotional fiction, but also a reserve of trust, sacrifice, and continuity.

The final question is not whether nations still exist. They do. The question is whether there are still enough people willing to live them as inheritance, limit, and duty. If the answer is negative, then the nation continues in documents, but has withdrawn from the collective soul. And if the answer is affirmative only among a reactive minority, then the political conflict of the future will not be between nation and absence of nation, but between those who still feel the loss and those who are no longer capable of understanding why it should hurt.



Conceptual chart: not an empirical time series, but a visual hypothesis about the average intensity and dispersion of national feeling.